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C O N F I D E N T I A L GABORONE 000110

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [ZI](#) [BC](#)

SUBJECT: BOTS-ZIM TENSIONS RISE OVER ARRESTED GOB OFFICIALS

Classified By: DCM Scott I. Hamilton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Government of Botswana said it would recall its Defense and Intelligence Attaches from Harare by the end of February and expects that Zimbabwe will similarly recall its Attaches from Gaborone to protest the GOZ's January 19 arrest and continued detention of three GOB wildlife officials who strayed across the border. In our view, the GOB decision to publicly announce the recall of its Attaches is a final attempt to gain high-level GOZ attention and urge speedy resolution of this matter. If the GOZ does not respond soon, tensions will increase and further strain the already difficult Botswana-Zimbabwe bilateral relationship. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On January 19, three officers from the Botswana Department of Wildlife were tracking a lion which had attacked local cattle near Lesomo (in the far North between Pandamatenga and Kasane, along the Zimbabwean border). The officers were driving a GOB vehicle and were armed. The border between Zimbabwe and Botswana is not demarcated in this region and the Wildlife Officers say that they accidentally crossed into Zimbabwe. They were subsequently arrested by Zimbabwe police and charged with immigration and firearms violations. They have been held in a Zimbabwean jail near Victoria Falls for three weeks as a Zimbabwean judge hears their case.

¶3. (U) The GOB reports that it has made numerous unsuccessful attempts to resolve this misunderstanding through diplomatic channels. In a press statement issued February 4 by the Botswana MFA, the GOB says that calls made by Police Commissioner Tsimako and Foreign Minister Skelemani to their Zimbabwe counterparts have gone unreturned. The statement also says that Vice President Merafhe attempted to meet President Mugabe on this issue at the recent African Union summit in Addis Ababa, but was unsuccessful. According to the press release, in response to the GOZ's refusal to resolve the case, the GOB will recall its Defense and Intelligence Attaches from Harare by the end of February, and they expect the GOZ to reciprocate.

¶4. (C) Comment: The GOB has lost patience with the GOZ's refusal to communicate and resolve what should be a fairly straightforward case of wildlife officials who wandered innocently across an unmarked border. Botswana's decision to publicly announce the recall of its Attaches seems to be one final attempt to focus high-level GOZ attention on this case and urge its speedy resolution. Senior Botswana Defense Force officials confirmed to our DATT that the Botswana Attache in Harare has been told to prepare to depart, and the Zimbabwean DATT in Gaborone similarly told the U.S. DATT that he has been informed by the GOZ that he may be leaving. As neither Attache has actually departed or even been given exact instructions yet, it would seem that the threat of recall is a political move which could be rescinded should

the case of the wildlife officials be resolved. However, if this matter is not resolved soon, tensions will increase and further strain the already difficult Botswana-Zimbabwe bilateral relationship. End Comment.

NOLAN